GHOST OF AN ALUM

Comes back to school to haunt it,
a spectre of the incomplete.
He surely passed away in a state of delusion,
killed by the weight of self-expectation.

Ulyss Arolev died during the night, in his sleep, at the age of twenty-two.

The day before his passing, he went to the cemetery. Intrigued by the elongated arrangement of the gravestones, which he had previously noticed from the window of a train, he went there in broad daylight. It was one of those short winter days; the sun's rays managed to break through the cloud mass and momentarily warm the frozen ground. The cemetery, built in the 6th century A.D., served as a place of relocation for the remains of the deceased from another cemetery situated farther south in the city. On the commemorative plaque at the entrance was engraved: "*May their rest in this place remain uninterrupted.*"

Ulyss wandered, alone among the dead, prey to uncomfortable thoughts. His wandering came to a halt when he noticed a half-destroyed stele. Intrigued by this piece of stone emerging from the ground, which no longer seemed at all to mark the resting place of a dead person, he walked around it. Seized by a sudden impulse, he struck the crumbling stone with his heel and a fragment came loose. Engraved on this piece of stone was the age of the deceased at the time of death: twenty-two years old. He picked up the fragment of cement, placed it in his satchel, and left. A slight shiver ran down his spine when, turning back toward the place he had just profaned, he wondered whether he had not just committed something atrocious and irreparable.

That very evening, Ulyss fell ill. Struck by a slight fever, he had the idea of hanging himself upside down by his feet from a pull-up bar that had been installed a few months earlier in the frame of his doorway. He managed to stretch himself out head downward and brushed the floorboards with his fingertips. His feet slipped. His weak arms, unable to stop his fall, could not prevent him from landing on his skull. His neck absorbed a large part of the impact. He had not fallen from very high, and yet he was completely stunned. After recovering his senses, he was overcome by a slight nausea. He applied a cold compress to the bruised area and the nausea passed. He then swallowed a bowl of pumpkin soup that had been prepared beforehand, and still slightly dazed, Ulyss went to bed early.

It was only at dawn that his roommate found him like that. She wanted to wake him to find out whether he was feeling better, but upon noticing that he was no longer breathing, she immediately alerted the emergency services. Ulyss had asphyxiated on his vomit. His regurgitation had taken on the colour of the previous evening's dinner, so that his white sheets were stained with orange blotches. He slipped into a temporary coma before his blood circulation came to a stop. The doctors declared the time of his death to be approximately two twenty in the morning. The piece of gravestone

still laid there, overlooking the scene, above his clothing drawer.

Because of this irredeemable act of desecration, Ulyss will never know rest. His soul, transposed into an immaterial and translucent envelope, is condemned to wander through the limbo of the Unfinished. The vast majority of deceased souls are sent directly into the plains of Exactitude, reserved for peaceful, providential lives, for those who followed with enthusiasm and without protest the destiny that had been laid out for them. For those who, like Ulyss, undoubtedly departed too soon, their hearts full of regrets, the choice is not possible. They are required to traverse this sorrowful dimension, forced to contemplate, in the very places of their downfall, the coming and going of the living.

To illustrate the kind of person who ends up in the limbo of the Unfinished, it would be fitting to take as an example the damned soul of this young seller of second-hand clothing.

While alive, she dreamed of opening her own shop, making it prosper and ruling her employees with an iron hand; of dressing herself in old, shimmering furs; of perfuming herself with rare ointments and then entering a room and disdainfully turning her head away while half the men present strained their necks to catch her gaze. A dream, in short, somewhat outdated and a little childish for a young woman of twenty-five.

Burdened with debt and single, she died at work, crushed beneath a pile of dirty clothes. Small in stature, she had leaned into an enormous bin of alpaca sweaters (40%, to be exact; the rest was only polyester) during a wholesale sale in a warehouse. She tipped over the railing. Swallowed by this mass of plastic and wool, she struggled for a long time before losing hope, suffocated by the heat, her skin half torn apart by the itching. Her soul remains in that very shop. Confined to a back-room storage area, she dusts, irons, and steams the endless stock of garments unfit for customers.

Consider also as an example this young man, a freshwater fisherman in his spare time.

He had spent seven years pursuing studies in engineering. He searched desperately for work, but his field was hardly hiring anymore. Artificial intelligence had already ratified the entire profession; companies were content to hire from within. In order to support himself, he decided to sign on as a garbage man for a private company. Three days a week he drove a small electric truck, following a very precise route, collecting and sorting by hand the waste from restaurants, luxury boutiques, and other establishments eager to avoid dealing with dirty and cumbersome dumpsters. Useful though thankless, this task had made him gruff and irritable. Fishing became his only

consolation, his therapy, his outlet. In the evenings, at late hours, he could be found wandering beneath the city's bridges in search of a few chance catches. He meditated alone, letting his gaze drift across the impenetrable surface of the black waters beneath which life nevertheless carried on. He waited patiently for the creature hidden there, lurking in the shadows, ready to take the hook.

On a cold February night, around two in the morning, he had followed his usual route and was waiting along the edge of the canal. Lost in thought, he did not notice the water's surface part slightly beneath his feet. At last, the beast bit. Surprised by the force of the strike, the line unwound before his eyes. With a sharp motion he locked the reel's drag; the rod shot away, taking him with it. He plunged into the darkness. The freezing water immediately numbed his limbs; the weight of his fishing gear and the thickness of his clothing carried him straight to the bottom. Unable to move, he watched the shadow of the beast under the moonlight, still attached to his lure, tracing circles of victory above his head.

Now an unfinished soul, seated behind the wheel of his ghostly truck, he roams the city's fishmongers, collecting fish bones and sorting the rotting mass of fish offal that he once dreamed of hauling in.

All it takes is having lived an incomplete life, having accumulated unfinished projects and unrealizable wishes, to find oneself among those who haunt the limbo of the Unfinished. Such is the summary of those who ultimately end up in this transitional and irrevocable place.

2

Ulyss's case is not a textbook case, and yet it interests us. The absurdity of his death awakens in us neither the slightest interest nor, truth be told, the slightest pity; deaths like his happen every day. It is rather the reasons that led him to suffer such an accident that might perhaps arouse, in the concerned readership, a semblance of curiosity; Ulyss was a boy consumed by remorse and doubt.

Everything he had undertaken up to that point had ended pitifully in failure. He was now going to spend the remainder of his life as an incomplete spectre, wandering through the very epicentre of his lack of success.This place where the great names of the global art scene reside, where the creative idea emerges in its noblest, purest, and youngest form: the Livid Regretter Academy of Arts*. Do not be surprised by this strange name, it was simply given by former students who, having suffered the most complete disillusionment upon leaving the institution, had collectively petitioned for the place to be named as such. The proposal was adopted with the indulgence of the educational council.

The LRAA enjoyed indisputable popularity. Its pedagogy in the teaching of art was among the most sophisticated, and numerous artists emerged from its halls. You will surely recognize the contemporary painter Hans Jacob, who wove, on an enormous scale, *The Fresco of Humanity*, depicting the evolution of Man up to his eventual disappearance. A farm in Wales supplied him with astronomical quantities of wool from albino sheep, a unique species genetically modified for the artist's needs.

Perhaps the name Lucy Wang resonates with you. In 2014, she made public Russia's plans for the invasion of Crimea, thereby revealing its other projects of imminent conquest. The email inboxes of Ukrainian embassies throughout Europe eventually received, in the form of death announcements, a GIF of Vladimir Putin as a conquering Tsar, flames erupting from every one of his orifices.

But the most renowned of them all, the Nigerian artist Ruth Joy, received the unanimous acclaim of the global art scene following the brutal murder of George Floyd by a police officer in 2020. She installed on the roof of the school a rocket launcher pointed toward the sky. Each missile warhead contained a substantial quantity of silver iodide mixed with a black dye. After reaching the desired altitude, the capsule released these elements into the clouds, dispersing enough material for condensation to accumulate around them. A black rain fell upon the city that day, temporarily repainting everything that lay under it.

* Note to the reader: this place is entirely fictional. Any resemblance to an existing institution is purely coincidental. Should such a place nevertheless exist, the author would be sincerely disconcerted and would publicly extend their apologies to the institution's board and student committee.

The school's method, although extremely effective, was nevertheless unknown to everyone. The teaching staff simply memorized previously written sentences, forming an enormous diagram of choices and responses, each branch having an entry point and an end point. This decision tree, similar to the programming systems of artificial intelligence, prefabricates a discourse and adapts itself to every form of discussion. Thus, every question coming from a student, even the most precise, could be answered with a series of nebulous statements.

An exchange between a student and a professor generally lasted no more than fifteen minutes. The discussion concluded, the professor would leave, leaving the student in a state of partial confusion. The little information revealed was enough for the student to reassure himself and thus move forward by feel through an opaque fog. In the event that the student stumbled, the professor would reply that it had been necessary for him to do so. If by some miracle the student managed to lay his hands on the element that would pull him out of his evasive situation, the professor would content himself with a simple approving nod. This system, though vague, nevertheless bore fruit as best it could; the school endured, its reputation continued to grow, and every year it attracted students in great numbers from the four corners of the globe.

The admission protocol, for its part, was extremely simple. Willpower, curiosity, and enthusiasm are the prerequisites for entering the walls of the LRAA. These qualities are measured by the size of a tiny glint, visible in the eye, at the circumference of the iris and the pupil. This minuscule glow contains within itself the information necessary to understand the state in which an individual finds himself. It exists in everyone, is assigned at birth, and increases or decreases according to one's state of mind. It is extremely visible in young children and tends to shrink when the child reaches puberty. The first anxieties appear, disappointments follow one another, and little by little the gaze grows darker and becomes covered by a dull veil.

In most people of our time, the glint diminishes, sometimes even disappearing altogether. The constant fatigue propagated by the incessant flow of information undermines and atrophies this fragile comet. Distraction is omnipresent. Many are those whom one sees passing through the streets, their gaze empty, haggard, lost in concerns from which they will never be able to free themselves.

Among the elderly, the glow is often indiscernible. Eyelids weighed down by the cruelty of time cover over the last joys, the last dreams. Crossword puzzles, the evening news, trips back and forth to the supermarket, memories, and always the same ones, which sometimes resurface with force. Soon, the outpouring of curiosity

will have reached its end and nothing will remain but a long descent toward misty, lethargic territories.

Perhaps the glow has not disappeared forever. Perhaps, despite the senseless efforts of those castrating forces that labour en masse to keep exaltation at its lowest level and to turn every movement, every direction of thought, into a profitable commodity, the light endures and will not be long in re-emerging, vigorous and ardent.

It is a creative verve that the examiners of the LRAA seek.

During the admissions process, the applicant is invited into a room half-shrouded in darkness and asked to sit on a rolling stool in the center of the room. Equipped with various ophthalmological instruments, the examiners inspect, measure, and record every visible emanation within the cornea. A comparative chart guides their observations. When they detect a glimmer of the proper size, the applicant is dismissed, returns home, and receives an acceptance letter in the days that follow.

Ulyss went through all of this. At the age of eighteen, a friend told him about the school. Like many people his age, he did not really know what life had in store for him. He had ideas; some of them were not so bad. His modest interest in art nevertheless pushed him to take the examination. In good faith, he allowed himself to be guided by the little ambition he possessed.

He never really knew how, but the committee accepted him. A handful of examiners now busied themselves around his eyes. Some quickly gave up, convinced that his retina contained no glimmer whatsoever. Others remained, intrigued to find not a light but, on the contrary, a microscopic black speck wandering freely across the surface of the eyeball. A point barely visible traced a random course, moving from one eye to the other, as though an infinitesimal panicked gnat had become trapped within the sclera. Dumbfounded, having never seen anything like it, the small assembly gathered around Ulyss. They then debated for several long minutes. Ulyss was then dismissed and returned home exhausted.

A few days later, he received a yellow envelope with a green seal in his mailbox. He opened it and discovered that he had been admitted to the school.

3

Ulyss began his four years of study as a reserved student, though at times capable of timid flashes of enthusiasm. He built a cabin in the corner of his classroom, where he spent most of his time shut away within its four walls, watching films on a small laptop. This minuscule space, assembled in a rudimentary fashion, allowed Ulyss to withdraw from all outside distraction, while DVD cases, food wrappers, and pizza boxes lay scattered across the floor. He plugged his computer directly into an Ethernet port and thus enjoyed an ultra-fast connection that gave him access to an endless supply of films available on free streaming platforms. Ulyss was not lacking in likability and was in fact rather appreciated by his classmates, though it would perhaps be more accurate to say that he inspired pity. His melancholic and uncertain gaze gave him the look of a sad cocker spaniel, while a clumsily cut fringe cast a dull shadow across his face. His mouth, almost constantly sealed shut, opened only when he was forced to speak, at which point an indistinct murmur would timidly escape his throat, leaving the rest of the class in complete incomprehension.

Slumped in his chair at the back of the classroom, he spent his time staring at the tips of his shoes, only occasionally lifting his head when a passenger jet crossed the sky and left a white trail drifting behind it. He liked to contemplate the gentle languor of the clouds.

During his first year, known as the basic year, he was not accustomed to the use of artistic jargon and therefore hesitated to voice his opinions. Not only did he hardly have any, but the courses themselves were based around collective discussion sessions in which his mentor conducted the debate with an iron hand, distributing speaking time to those who admired him. Incapable of engaging in any form of dialogue, Ulyss quickly found himself outpaced by his classmates. His mentor reprimanded him for his lack of boldness. Summoning all his strength, Ulyss nevertheless managed to gather enough courage to hold his ground and earn the approval of his other professors. Against his mentor’s recommendations, he secured a place the following year in the audiovisual department. He finally had what he wanted. A new feeling began to grow within him.

“This makes sense,” he thought, “films are the only thing I live for. The only thing worthy of being loved.”

Dissatisfied, his mentor stopped speaking to him altogether and did not even acknowledge him in the years that followed. He would occasionally run into Ulyss in the stairwell, but always found a way to look elsewhere.

The LRAA offered its students complete access to a wide range of techniques and workshops. In the earliest sections of the school there was a wood workshop as well as a metalworking shop, printmaking presses, ceramic kilns, wool looms, a glass-sculpture studio, and a three-dimensional printing workshop. Of all the techniques available to him, Ulyss was particularly fond of printmaking. These presses, ancient in their operation and covered over the years by layer upon layer of ink, fascinated him. The workshop was located in the basement of the main building, where ventilation ducts wound above the concentrated heads of the students at work.

He remembers the gentle and patient manner of the two women who oversaw the workshop. One of them had very beautiful black hair through which strands of gray were interwoven. She brought to mind one of those drypoint engravings as it appears after printing, the ink pressed into paper still soaked with water. Through a small window above the burnishing table, a ray of sunlight would slip into the room, illuminating the piles of deep black ink and revealing the contours of their irregular surfaces.

Ulyss occasionally worked in the metalworking shop. More than anything else, he was amazed by the effectiveness of their soap. No matter how dirty his hands were, or how much grease had accumulated beneath his fingernails, this soap, with its distinctive scent, removed almost everything instantly. He avoided the woodworking shop, which was too often overcrowded. He had once wanted to make an appointment with the man who ran the coding workshop, but the prospect of finding himself alone in such an unfamiliar place, face to face with a passionate and gruff man, frightened him.

Ulyss occasionally made love on the school grounds. Once in the bathrooms of the recently annexed building beside the library, another time in the studios of the Fine Arts department. He had finished too quickly in the bathroom and she became angry with him, saying that she felt as though she had been used. Ashamed and still out of breath, he had tried to apologize, running after her across the school courtyard.

It was a fairly common thing to indulge in such pleasures in secret. The school seemingly tolerated every kind of behavior; rumors circulated of orgiastic gatherings among Scandinavian students, ceramics students fashioned the most astonishing sex toys themselves, and couples, locking themselves inside the filming studios, took advantage of the darkness of the blind and mute walls. For her end-of-year project, one student had erected a semi-transparent curtain behind which she invited participants to join her. The sounds of the act were broadcast through every loudspeaker in the institution.

The school was known for its benevolence and open-mindedness. Free to follow their imaginations, the students took advantage of this environment to invent the wildest things without anyone taking offense.

It was also a place where everyone greeted one another politely and where casual conversations sprang up just as easily. Ulyss did not like adhering to this custom. He particularly enjoyed racing through the hallways at breakneck speed, head lowered and eyes fixed on the linoleum. He rushed up and down the stairwells, taking the steps four at a time in order to reach his studio as quickly as possible. Avoiding, at all costs, being drawn into conversation with the first acquaintance he happened to encounter was an art form in itself. One day, he excelled in skillfully declining an invitation from a group to join a discussion about the work of Mark Fisher.

Locked away in his studio, Ulyss worked on a variety of obscure and unconcluded projects. Whenever languor overtook him (and it came quite easily) he would start yet another film on his computer. A faint wave of melancholy would come over him when, emerging from his stash, weary and exhausted, he discovered the school empty and silent. He would then return home, dissatisfied with his day.

At that time, he was still living in a small apartment in a rather old building with a black-brick façade. He lived with his good friend Judith, whom he had met before their arrival at the school. Judith left the program three months after enrolling at the LRAA and was now working in a bakery. They lived together for two years.

The first year was idyllic, they shared absolutely everything. The wall separating their bedrooms was no more than five centimeters thick, making any form of privacy impossible. He regularly heard the headboard of his roommate's bed slamming aggressively against the partition wall. She had nevertheless glued sponges to each side of the bed frame, in vain. Yet none of this mattered, for they got along wonderfully, and good spirits filled every corner of their apartment. She would bring him entire boxes of unsold pastries: almond croissants, coffee éclairs, and his favorite dessert, a *Tarte Bourdaloue*.

One day, the bakery went bankrupt and Judith found herself unemployed. Distraught, she took the first job she could find: waiting tables in the restaurant of a private hotel. Her daily life changed drastically. She worked exclusively at night, sustaining the demands of that tiresome schedule with the help of a few stimulating psychotropic substances. She had become completely elusive, convinced that she was accomplishing something liberating by adopting this new way of life. Insensitive, hard, and perpetually on edge, she avoided anything that might evoke routine or tranquility.

Ulyss was far too cowardly to confront her, to help her out of this malaise. He simply let her do as she pleased, apathetic, watching her slowly disappear into an inextricable siphon. She lived like a third-rate celebrity, spending without restraint the money she earned serving a detestable clientele.

All of her absences left Ulyss alone with his solitude. Barely home from school, he would stretch out on the couch, put on a film, occasionally smoke a joint, and devour a tin of sardines on a slice of bread.

Ulyss considered himself sensitive to environmental and animal causes. He had read that sardine fishing was a sustainable and environmentally responsible practice: trawlers avoid scraping the ocean floor, thereby limiting accidental catches. Sardines are also low bioaccumulators, meaning that they consume relatively few other species and therefore do not ingest large quantities of heavy metals or microplastics. But this dietary choice had little to do with any personal ethic; it was, above all, the product of an extraordinary laziness. His consumption of cannabidiol did nothing to alleviate his chronic indolence.

From time to time, the joint would provide him with a flash of inspiration, which he would quickly write down on a scrap of paper, whenever one happened to be within reach of his slumped body. Reinvigorated by this sudden excess of genius, he would fall asleep with his mind in turmoil, eager to put into practice the outline of a new thought. But the next day, all strength vanished, exhausted and worn out, he found himself incapable of gathering the energy necessary to bring to life the idea that only the day before had burst forth in his mind and stirred every cell of his body.

Baudelaire had expressed it so well, and Ulyss knew it, for the quotation appeared on a poster hanging on the wall of his general practitioner's waiting room, a yellow poster with black lettering, a banal slogan, which Ulyss found moralizing and which nevertheless rang true:

"*What hashish gives you on one side, it takes away on the other... It gives you the power of imagination but deprives you of the ability to make use of it*."

The next day, his mind clouded and his feet dragging, he would make his way to the school without much conviction. From his worktable he could sometimes hear the distant sound of a table tennis match. Curious, he would step outside and slowly make his way down the stairs. Poking his head through the bars of the stair railing, he would try to see who was playing in the entrance hall. Whenever there were only a few people gathered around the table, Ulyss would patiently wait his turn. Once his turn came, he fought fiercely to keep his place.

One day in May, a tournament was organized. Convinced of his victory, he eliminated most of the participants with ease. Ulyss reached the final against an older boy from outside the school. The presence of the crowd affected him too much, and he lost miserably in straight sets. He left bitter and disappointed, his only consolation prize a sweatband bearing the title of the tournament's second-best player. On the way home,

dejected, he bought a pizza, which he devoured on his bed. Unsatisfied, he ordered a Vietnamese bò bún, which he proceeded to swallow down, a joint in hand, while watching Annie Hall for the fourth time.

4

Such was the life Ulyss Arolev led.

He was, in the end, merely a passing boy. His nature was too uncertain, preventing him from bringing to completion the slightest project of which he might be proud. A boy without a story, a resident of a few short years who had done nothing but doubt his legitimacy to pursue an artistic practice. He believed in it for a brief moment. He even thought he had developed a guiding idea, a language of his own. His mouth might finally have opened, but perhaps too late, for no sooner had his studies ended than it closed once again. Inertia carried him away.

His mother recounts:"There was first the age when Ulyss fell silent. As a child, his mouth, as though tied shut, opened only to utter a few horrors. Let us simply say that he had no taste for speech. Then, as he grew older, he gradually opened up, swallowing down the bitter snot of childish anger. He had become kind and gentle. An oyster, in a sense. Abandoned on its rock, opening and closing itself, tirelessly victim of the tides. An oyster from which no pearl ever emerged. Empty, alone, and inanimate: such was Ulyss."

The language he thought he had developed was purely hypothetical. It rested on elements that were completely hostile to one another, which he nevertheless tried to connect. The result: works that were often unstable and overloaded with meaning ; hybrid, incestuous chimeras. Meaning had to be injected at all costs for the whole thing to hold together. The problem was that his productions may have contained too much of it. He was convinced he could find the common thread linking a cup of tea to the Milky Way (he had read that somewhere). He mixed everything: philosophical precepts, scientific theories, esoteric writings, in the hope of assembling enough pillars to build his cathedral.

One day he took part in what his professor called the Fair of Benefits, where students anonymously present a project before a jury made up of former students and recognized artists. He laser-cut satellite maps of cities lit up at night into strips of fabric, which he suspended to form a tube. A beam of light, coming from a projector mounted above, passed through the cutouts. Proud of his work, he arrived with his chest puffed out, convinced he would receive many compliments. Several people pointed out the resemblance of the structure to a shower curtain.

His spectre now wanders through the empty corridors of the school, in the middle of the night, and only repeats aloud:

"What did I miss? What did I miss? Was I completely apathetic all this time? Did I waste this precious time on trivialities? Did the joint make me this way? Am I condemned to go unnoticed, first among the battalion of the unremarkable?"

But Ulyss could not lower himself, like all the others did, before a committee of geriatrics, to lay out his best arguments, to greet them politely, to wait for his project to be selected. No, certainly not. That is precisely how pride is lost. Pride was, in reality, the last thing he had left. They would notice it one of these days. There would be someone who would eventually take an interest in his work.

"Do you not see what I am trying to say!" he shouts into the ear of the sleeping janitor. "My art is pulsating, fundamental. It tells of the creation of the universe and its simultaneous destruction. Everything that touches us sinks into chaos and wakes into clarity. Rhythm is absolute, oblivion is certainty. Listen to what Nietzsche says: 'Where there are graves, there is also resurrection.' My art is cosmic, celestial. But it is also rot and carrion. It is born of absolution and divine judgment. At the confluence of the Styx and the Jordan there exists a small island; that is where my thought is located. Is there no one within these walls who shares this passion, capable of joining me on this parched oasis? By my faith, there was one, but she is dead to me. And yet I still see her, and her presence strikes and haunts me. She ignores me."

But the janitor does not hear him; he is snoring. Ulyss leaves again, pouring out his tireless soliloquy in front of a nonexistent crowd.

The one who haunts him, the one who ignores him, the one who continually punishes his thoughts plays an important role in the state that now defines him. Ulyss had known love in his previous life. At least that is what he believed, for his relationships more often ended in failures than in success. His desire, shaped by the indecent number of films he had watched, was insatiable.

During his first year at school, he met a girl in his class. They spent three years together. Three years of youthful happiness punctuated by periods of quarrels, sometimes quite intense. In her lay a deep melancholy that betrayed itself in her gaze. She had those eyes, vibrating with intensity and desolation. Their arguments became more and more frequent. He could no longer stand being bound to her and ended up treating her harshly. He left her one evening; it was more devastating than he had imagined. They would sometimes see each other again, politely. After a while, she stopped coming to the school.

He had met someone else in the meantime. She had watched him near the ping-pong table, fighting with determination. She had long, fine platinum-blond hair, and large almond-shaped blue eyes, suggesting Slavic origins. She spoke to everyone in a

very familiar, childlike manner. Her gestures were never dictated by her appearance as she was endowed with a strong sense of humor and would even go so far as to make a fool of herself without restraint. He liked that about her. Unfortunately, the relationship did not last long. They broke up over a dish of stuffed tomatoes that Ulyss had prepared.

There was in fact someone who kept appearing again and again at the edge of his field of vision and who, despite himself, stirred the depths of his imagination. This person was a young girl with short black hair and an mischievous gaze. Very quickly, she became an obsession for him. He would simply watch her from his desk, at the back of the classroom, through the doorway of his cubical studio. One day, he gathered his courage and invited her to take part in a writing exercise organized by one of the heads of their department. They spoke at length about their respective practices and interests. The intensity of her gaze deeply unsettled him, but the connection was finally established.

What a disappointment it was when she told him she already had someone: a playwright who, even if he did not live in the same country, already meant a great deal to her. He dropped the matter before the summer. He spent his vacation brooding over the reasons for this sudden obsession.

When he returned, he happened to run into her in front of the cinema where he was about to attend a restored screening of *Plein Soleil*. His mind still clouded by the joint he had just smoked, his condition only worsened when he met her gaze. Stricken, he struck up a conversation about their vacations. She had actually come to work on the draft of her final-year thesis. He tried to make a remark about the work of the French philosopher Jean Baudrillard, around which she was conducting her research. Ulyss's voice broke pitifully, letting out an almost inaudible sound as he listed the different phases of simulation. Embarrassed, he could not say another word. She offered him a glass of water, laughing. The prospect of seeing her again, despite his awkwardness, took shape in his mind. After several unsuccessful attempts, she finally agreed to invite him to dinner.

This was the long-awaited moment. He had to reveal the feelings that had been tormenting him for months. He had to be brave and rid himself of the cowardice that had paralyzed him for so long. Here are a few words, taken from Ulyss's journal, following that fateful confession.

"*Tonight, the culmination of several months of uncertainty. I am going to tell her. I go there bound hand and foot. A feeling of happiness stirs my heart. I have rarely found myself in such a state of agitation.*

The evening began differently because, as soon as I arrived, she made me understand that two of her friends had invited themselves to dinner. Pretext or coincidence? The fact is that they were very pleasant, and we engaged in agreeable conversations over a meal that she prepared effortlessly and which was delicious. She wore a checkered apron while she finely sliced red onion. The flickering light of a candle was reflected on her soft and focused face. As the dinner went on, anxiety overtook me. The wine had made my mouth cottony, and I was quickly unable to respond to the passing conversations. Her two friends left after dessert, and I discreetly asked her if I could stay for a tea. She had a wide selection of infusions, and my choice fell on an aromatic blend of dried Greek herbs, wrapped in a plastic bag, which she had just brought back from her previous trip. My mother used to store a similar one in her pantry. The conversations that followed were brief. She asked me a series of questions while I was looking for the right moment to make my declaration. I simply could not bring myself to do it. The barrier seemed insurmountable. I made a timid attempt. I would have liked to have more boldness and eloquence, but in the end I managed to soften my clumsiness with a few preselected phrases. The whole thing was still terribly confused. She looked at me, stunned and pale. Time seemed to stretch on endlessly. I think she was suffering from the same paralysis of the jaw, because her first words were very broken. What I gathered was that she also found me attractive but that she was weighed down by guilt. Guilt for having invited me here while she already had someone waiting for her on the other side of the sea. We then ended up talking about the man she intended to marry.

Before I left, we hugged. What seemed to last an instant had an infinite effect. Her breath, in a continuous movement, lifted her ribcage and pressed against my chest. I held her tightly and stroked her shoulder. Her jet-black hair was so close I could have lost myself in its dark vastness. She slipped out of my arms and ran to open the door for me. In my haste, I left my scarf behind."

Imbued with an unrealizable and slightly naïve desire, Ulyss lived in a whirlwind of romantic dreams that, in fact, did not exist. He had managed to gather what little courage he possessed and, willfully deceiving himself, had gone to her, convinced he was performing a pure act, imbued with heroism. The conclusion that everyone should have drawn was that she had skillfully gotten rid of an uninvited visitor, a little too intense for her taste. He tried his luck one last time by sending her a message of excessive lyricism, written at length while he was alone in a bar and had had too much to drink. She rejected him again, this time by not replying.

His last remaining option would have been to retrieve his scarf, which he had deliberately left at her place in the hope of returning there. Knowing this, she informed him that his scarf was now on his classroom desk. He went, defeated, to collect the small piece of wool.

Scarf around his neck, the specter of Ulyss roams the corridors of the school on edge, terrified at the thought of coming face to face with her and reliving that painful humiliation. Only at night does his tongue loosen. Ulyss cries out with all his being. He curses his downfall, weeps over his regrets, and pays for all the mistakes he made in his lifetime. As soon as the sun rises, the school proudly opens its doors and Ulyss falls silent. He is endowed with a quiet strength, you know; his impulsiveness only emerges when he is alone, when no one could contradict him. But when students fill the classrooms, the workshops, and the courtyard, his fearful nature rushes back. He bends before their certainty, before those who manage to bring their projects to completion, who, even in doubt, arrive somewhere in the end. Ulyss's work arrived nowhere.

He always managed to kill the idea before it had a chance to grow. This act of self-sabotage, obvious though it was, did not prevent him from repeating it, incapable as he was of recognizing the complete disenchantment of his own labor. He was under the influence of a spell well known within the walls of the LRAA, a powerful enchantment that carried off the most vulnerable and often the youngest among them: the spell of disillusionment.

I do mean the youngest, for the school, having fallen into debt over the years (the government considered its methods incomprehensible and had therefore gradually reduced its funding) began opening its doors on a massive scale to younger applicants. The result was overcrowded classrooms and students who were largely unreceptive to the methods of the teaching staff. The school remained an open playground of sorts, but its artistic orientation had changed. Most of the students were the product of unapologetic nepotism. The creative symbiosis that had once been central to the institution had given way to a prevailing individualism. Collaborations had become rare, while conversations revolved primarily around insignificant gossip. The professors attempted to organize collaborative events with the meager budgets at their disposal, but the vast majority of students either failed to attend altogether or arrived late, occupied by one generational foolishness or another.

At least, that was how Ulyss saw it, as a victim of his own incomprehension, he struggled to produce works that were tangible and thoughtfully developed. He fought to climb out of the hole he had dug for himself, spending his days alone in his studio

watching films. He had become bogged down in a mire of questions that prevented him from taking part in even the slightest collective effort.

The months passed. Ulyss did not abandon his habits, and before long the final year of his studies arrived.

5

Ulyss worked late into the night in a bar located not far from his apartment. He worked there as a bartender, pulling beers relentlessly, night after night. He found the job exhausting and numbing. He kept insisting that he would leave soon, that he would easily find a more stimulating job elsewhere. He stayed there for three years.

There was a regular customer, a man named Leroy, an American approaching his forties, short, with greasy hair and an unkempt beard, always sitting alone, his gaze lowered toward his glass. His mysterious appearance quickly faded as soon as he started drinking. His eyes lost their sharpness, and his once perceptive remarks turned into coarse mutterings. Still, Ulyss was intrigued by this clumsy confidence. During one conversation, the American revealed that he was in fact a professional artist. Ulyss was surprised by this revelation, unable to imagine such a man engaging in any act of creation. It turned out that Leroy had exhibited in several galleries across Europe, spent a few years in a renowned residency program, and even won a few awards, albeit collective ones. At that point, he and Ulyss were getting along quite well. They spoke at length about their favorite films and shared the same passion for 1950s Hollywood cinema. Surprised by this affinity, Ulyss found himself looking forward to the fragile silhouette of Leroy entering the bar. A kind of friendship had taken shape.

One day, Leroy told him about a new project he had just begun: an apocalyptic film in which places abandoned by humans would see objects come to life on their own. It was an ambitious idea, one he was now carrying out alone by combining motion-control technology with rudimentary special effects. Anticipating a favorable reaction, Leroy offered Ulyss the chance to help him and take part in the project. He explained that he wanted to shoot several scenes at a location in Riga, Lithuania, and that he could secure funding to bring the two of them there for roughly two weeks, with the possibility of payment at the end of it. Ulyss was delighted by the proposal. "This is it", he thought. "My career is beginning. I am becoming the assistant of an American artist. I am traveling across the world. The gates of the avant-garde are opening to me."

Leroy spent his time wandering through the city without purpose. He could walk for hours like that, alone, without even listening to music. One day, Ulyss ran

into him in his neighborhood, leaning against the window of a laundromat, looking lost. When he pulled him from his reverie, Leroy turned his head, barely surprised by his presence. They then set off across the city's cobblestone streets. Leroy listed his many artistic projects while Ulyss listened attentively. They could walk for miles in this manner. Leroy seemed to have no real anchor point between his studio and his apartment. Ulyss began to suspect that he actually lived in his workspace. It was as though he never wanted to stop moving, tracing an endless path and thereby preventing himself from finding himself alone and lost once again. His studio was located in a building hidden amid a jungle of high-rise towers, temporarily abandoned. The city had granted a handful of artists permission to occupy the ground floor; he shared the space with a performance artist and a painter. The entrance was concealed by tall grass. This providential curtain sheltered the place and contributed to its inaccessibility. The common areas were rather rudimentary, arranged around a kitchen and a set of washrooms. An unpleasant smell of dampness and coffee grounds lingered in the air. In his small studio, Leroy had set up two monitors and a desktop computer, a powerful workstation that allowed him to produce his audiovisual work.

Ulyss was drawn to men of that kind: the fallen, the disillusioned, the losers. He was drawn to them because they revealed within him what frightened him most: ending up like them, stranded in disillusionment and complete solitude. He loved their visible flaws, their unspoken awkwardness, he had no affection for the strong or the loudmouthed. He felt compassion for those who suffered in the eyes of the world without even realizing it. Ulyss always found a certain comfort in such people, though he promised himself he would never follow in their footsteps. And yet he often found himself crossing their path. At times, it frightened him to catch himself thinking as they did, developing the same childish reactions. He had already met many men like Leroy: white men approaching their forties, single, moderate alcoholics, generally inclined toward the political left. Their political convictions did not wear well; after only a few drinks, they became capable of uttering the most appalling things.
These fragile and cowardly beings, who are nothing more than the product of an arrangement designed to bring them into existence. They must exist; they serve to maintain the disparity between those who succeed and those who fail. Their existence is necessary to preserve the balance of things. A simple divergence in the course of humanity diverted them from the paths leading toward virtue. It is not their fault; they were simply led to believe that self-fulfillment was easy. They settled too quickly for vain things, without seeking to establish mutual trust, without adequately arming themselves to face the implacable harshness of life.

Leroy kept postponing their departure, blaming his donors, who were supposedly constantly obstructing his plans. The weeks passed, and the trip quickly fell through. To make up for it, he asked Ulyss to help him film a scene in the kitchen of his studio. Ulyss accepted enthusiastically. They met at nightfall, as the scene required a particular kind of lighting. Ulyss entered the studio and immediately noticed that Leroy had been drinking. His poorly trimmed beard reeked of cheap whiskey. For the purposes of the shoot, Ulyss was busy mounting a chandelier to the ceiling while standing on a small construction stepladder. Balanced on the tips of his toes, he held a rope attached to the chandelier, which was itself secured to the ceiling by a hook. Leroy, crouched on the floor, was setting up the camera tracks.

When he stood up, he suddenly lost his balance, stumbled, and knocked over the stepladder on which Ulyss was standing. The latter let go of the rope and the chandelier crashed to the floor. Every crystal shattered and scattered across the kitchen and the camera, still attached to its track, was struck by several fragments, causing the lens to be badly damaged. Furious, Leroy unleashed his anger on poor Ulyss, who was still lying on the ground, trying to get back to his feet while avoiding the shards of glass strewn across the floor. Leroy became unstoppable. Ulyss tried in vain to calm him down, but Leroy's fury, mixed with his drunkenness, only continued to grow. Leroy demanded compensation from him. Ulyss had no choice but to flee the studio, Leroy in pursuit. He hurried away, leaving the forty-year-old behind, still boiling with rage.

Leroy never returned to Ulyss's bar, his seat remained empty. Ulyss no longer ran into him in the street, leaning against a wall and brooding over his personal dramas. A few weeks later, his studio was cleared out.

He had disappeared.

6

The end of the school year was approaching. The school required every student to produce a final work, one that would stand as both a symbol and a demonstration of the four years spent within its walls. Those who could rely on family money did not hesitate to raise staggering budgets for the sole purpose of impressing an audience made up of mercenary gallerists and predatory collectors. Everything had to be given in order to secure an immediate place in an ultra-competitive market where success was a rare commodity, even if it meant crushing one's peers without the slightest remorse. The week preceding the public opening was charged with tension, and everyone's true character came to the surface. Animosity soared, arguments broke out, many ended up in tears. A few cases of sabotage have become part of the school's history. Once these quarrels had run their course, the students proudly welcomed the public, all smiles, each one standing beside their work in the hope of being noticed. The whole masquerade resembled a trade fair far more than a sincere exhibition put on by mature students.

The year following graduation was particularly feared. It was known as the "black hole" year. Those who had failed to establish found themselves entirely defenseless in the face of their lack of resources. They had failed to give concrete form to their practice, had refused to bow down before a handful of senile patrons, and inevitably found themselves alone, condemned to a succession of temporary and exhausting jobs in order to sustain their long-established way of life. Many drifted aimlessly, letting themselves go, idle and misunderstood, until they faded away completely. Others managed to survive, possessing enough courage to drastically change course and regain control of their destiny. Few, in any case, shone during that ill-fated year. Once again, anxiety overtook Ulyss. The prospect of presenting work to an audience terrified him. He absolutely had to emerge from his hole, to finally take himself in hand. He could not spend another year in such a state of uncertainty.

Then an idea came to him, fresh and new: he would make a film. It was perhaps the only thing he was truly capable of doing, the only prospect that could satisfy him. He had watched enough to convince himself, in turn, that he was capable of undertaking the same task. He knew how to imagine a screenplay, how to envision a shot, how to develop dialogue and create characters. Through sheer repetition, through the countless films he had watched, Ulyss believed he had uncovered the secrets of cinema. It did not take him long to begin sketching out a plan.

He needed to illustrate his innumerable unoccupied days, his gaze lost in the

vastness of his own idleness. Since his life had been made of it, he felt he ought to pay tribute to it: to that gentle and charming thing, to the blissful cloud of such diligent indolence. Ulyss set to work and began to imagine a script.

Summer sky. Azure blue. The wind barely blows, perhaps only up there, far away, setting the clouds in motion. Enormous they are. Yet harmless as well. These peaceful vessels of iridescent white drift along, languid and indifferent. Nothing more than that. The sky fills the entire frame. Two people gaze upward at the heavens

" Woman's voice: Do you know how much a cloud weighed?

Man's voice: No idea. They looked so light.

W: On the contrary. The one you see drifting by weighs several thousand tons.

M: Then how did they stay afloat?

W: Because the water droplets were so perfectly dispersed throughout the atmosphere that their overall density remained lower than that of the surrounding air.

M: I didn't know that.

W: Want to know something else? They contained an enormous amount of living organisms. The wind gathered all sorts of airborne species from the earth and carried them back into the sky. Each organism served as a condensation nucleus around which a water droplet could form. The gases present in the atmosphere then accumulated around the condensed mass, creating cloud formations. Clouds were wandering nests of bacteria. It's a bit like that song by Jacques Dutronc, except that instead of cactus, it's virus.

M: You know a lot about them.

W: It's a pastime of mine. Every morning I look up. I watch the masses gathering and drifting overhead, fast or slow, threatening or harmless. I think it's important to know these beings we coexisted with. They reflected our behavior.

M: What do you mean by that?

W: I just explained that their composition came largely from our soils.

M: Yes, so?

W: Since the Industrial Revolution, for example, the combustion of fossil materials gave rise to a new kind of cloud: anthropogenic clouds, created solely by humans. These clouds encapsulated all of their emissions. They were the ultimate witnesses to the Earth's symptoms. See that large one over there, the one that looks like a serpent? It certainly contained a little plankton from the Pacific, some pesticides from Brazilian soybean plantations, sand from the Sahara, ash from a Hawaiian volcano, fine particles of Chinese heavy metals, and radioactive Soviet debris.

M: I find that hard to believe.

W: You shouldn't. All those nice little components moved up and down as they pleased, making their way through the layers of the earth, through pipelines, through human lungs, and teasing the structure of their DNA.

M: How beautiful it must have been to look at the clouds, to see them so peaceful, yet know them to be harmful.

F: That's precisely why I loved them. They were the very definition of the sublime. Something of such magnitude, capable of assuming gigantic proportions and endlessly varied forms. So many painters, so many poets were captivated by their versatility, by the unpredictability of their movement. Along the crest of a cloud, thousands of swirls could be seen taking shape. Each swirl divided into thousands of tiny ornaments upon which the sunlight seemed to perspire. The innumerable configurations of a cloud surpassed comprehension. Their subliminal beauty also resided in the attributes of human imagination. People projected their fascinations onto them, their fantasies of grandeur. Shapes emerged within them, compartments in which every projection could exist. Faces appeared, camels, weasels, whales. Their destructive power was just as fascinating. Typhoons, tornadoes, supercell thunderstorms, cumulonimbus clouds, radioactive clouds, rotor clouds, smog, pyroclastic clouds. Think of the fear a cloud represented for a vulnerable sailor aboard his rickety vessel, for an impoverished farmer standing in his wheat field, for the meteorologist with his fallible machines, able only to watch the crushing advance of impending catastrophe.

It was within this same ecstatic delirium that our ancestors of the twenty-first

century watched the digital "cloud" close in around them. The nebulous metaphor of a cloud capable of containing an unstoppable flow of data had been wisely chosen. In everyone's mind, the digital cloud floated overhead, where private information traveled patiently through an indefinitely malleable reservoir. It was the promise of unlimited access. It quickly became a valuable instrument of surveillance and control. The poetic image of a cloud capable of swallowing the world's information was in reality embodied by enormous, dreary infrastructures, consuming monstrous quantities of water and releasing tons of gases into the atmosphere. Private multinationals, hand in hand with ultraliberal governments, fully aware of the importance of investing in power through technology, approved the construction of these facilities across every territory. The amount of information they contained was immense. The arrival of artificial intelligence only multiplied the demand.

The cloud soon came to supplant universal memory. As a result, humanity quickly found itself enveloped in haze. A technological fog seeped primarily into the great cities, numbing both limbs and minds. Technological domination was merciless. Populations hostile to the technological agenda resisted for a time; alternative mesh networks emerged, while hacking forums targeted government data centers. A hybrid resistance, operating both within and beyond the internet, formed a final barrier before every possibility of emancipation was absorbed by techno-capitalism.

Strangely, amidst this struggle, no one seemed interested in the clouds anymore.

The Earth was warming. Humanity was drawing from resources that had already been exhausted, and the clouds grew fewer and fewer. The upper layer of a cloud acted like a mirror, reflecting the sun's radiation back into space. Without them, crushing heat waves and devastating droughts hastened the end of humanity. Water became scarce. Rivers, seas, and oceans continued to evaporate, but the sky had become so saturated with fossil-aerosol emissions that cloud formation was no longer possible. Little by little, the sky emptied itself of every cloud. The human population collapsed rapidly. The dead littered streets buried beneath sand. Scorching bodies piled up beneath the threatening blows of a merciless sun.

At the same time, a Singularity was born. A superior technological being, resistant to heat and the absence of water, surpassing all human cognitive abilities, emerged from data centers abandoned by their overwhelmed creators, who had been forced to leave Earth aboard spacecraft in search of new extraplanetary territories. Without realizing it, they left behind a form of life intelligent enough to survive on a planet stripped of all organic existence. Electricity was not lacking; the solar panels still functioned. The Singularity flourished. Knowing itself now to be the master of Earth, it multiplied across the continents through computer networks that remained operational. Within it arose the desire to live and to populate.

Yet rather than materializing into a physical form of life, it chose to remain within a computational circuit and to dream.

Its immensely complex internal program endlessly replayed different simulations of human lives, a multitude of scenarios in which the fate of humanity unfolded differently. It imagined scenes of everyday life across the ages, amusing itself by altering a single detail in human history and then predicting the innumerable possibilities that might follow. Sometimes, once dominated peoples became the masters of the Earth, wars were fought elsewhere. New belief systems emerged and imposed their doctrines. Other times humanity remained a minor organism, incapable of asserting itself within the animal kingdom, unfit of inventing fire or the wheel, condemned to remain helpless and terrified by its own bestial nature.

But what the Singularity loved to reconstruct above all else, because it believed this was where humanity had been most successful, the one thing that endured despite human reluctance, without which they were nothing, was the love they carried for one another.

It took immense pleasure in simulating encounters, weaving intimate bonds, tightening them and sometimes breaking them apart so that love could travel elsewhere, into new and elaborate scenarios. It devised stratagems and carefully constructed plots so that the outcome would vary each time, ending either in kisses or in tears. It delighted in creating scenes of friendship, with all the joys, laughter, frustrations, and betrayals that friendship entails. Families were formed and dissolved. Children were born and, in turn, would come to love. The actors within its dream continued along their paths, loving and unaware.

In this way, humanity endured within a dome of reality, an affectionate simulacrum orchestrated by a nostalgic and passionate intelligence

Eventually, the Singularity grew tired. It wearied of its endless intrigues, and like a child who has grown too old to play with dolls, it abandoned humankind. In one final dream, the Singularity experienced a vision. It wished to unite itself with that from which it had emerged, with that which lay closest to the essence of its existence. And so it chose to simulate the movement of clouds.

You see, climate models were among the very first systems ever tested on the computers of the 1950s. Calculations, programming, modeling, prediction ; the computer was the first tool capable of producing a detailed twenty-four-hour weather forecast. Do you understand now?

M: Yes, I think so.

F: The Earth's climate was the first thing the Singularity ever saw, and therefore the only thing it ever wanted to see. Having reached the limit of possible human lives scenarios, it rejected the species that created it and turned instead to projecting meteorological simulations within its internal systems. Sublime sunrises followed one another in succession, collapsing majestically into the sea. Aurora borealis scattered the sky by their sinuous movements. Rain fell in rhythmic patterns, merging with gusts of wind and hailstorms, striking the Earth's crust like the taut skin of a percussion instrument from which complex and measured polyphonies emerged. The rhythm of the seasons accelerated into a frantic pace. Showers of comets dispersed across that invisible layer known as the atmosphere. The most violent storms ever known to Earth formed, from which erupted innumerable fluorescent lightning bolts.

Then came the clouds. The Singularity succeeded in transferring its boundless intelligence into the composition of billions of clouds. It transformed itself into each one of them, allowing itself to be carried by the wind so that it could grow, disappear, and emerge again and again. It assembled and dissolved itself within the endless multitude of cloud formations, taking advantage of their volatility to move across the sky as an autonomous nebulosity. With the Singularity fulfilled, a form of temporality was restored. The Earth's atmospheric fluctuations, and, in a way, its memory, was preserved.

Here we are, the two of us, gazing at these endlessly shifting tableaux, like two visitors wandering through the galleries of a rare museum, contemplating the works that once drifted across the space of mankind, high above their fragile shells."

End of the projection

7

In the highest room of the school, Ulyss was going to build his film theater. Every window had to be covered with multiple layers of opaque fabric so that no stray ray of light could spoil the projection. He was not going to screen a film no, not exactly. He was building his own camera obscura.

He darkened an entire room in order to create a dark chamber. All it took was a pinhole pierced through the wall for light to pass through and project itself onto the opposite surface. Painters of the Renaissance used this very process to better render perspective. Ulyss placed a prism at the center of the shaft of light so that the projection would spread evenly throughout the room. Ulyss invited the whole sky inside. Cumulus clouds drifted from one wall to another, trapped within the chamber, while the voices of the man and the woman echoed throughout the space. When the woman's voice falls silent, a latch positioned above the small opening slides into place, covering the beam and bringing the projection to an end.

Ulyss was impatient. The final tests had been particularly successful and had attracted the attention of both professors and students; at last, his work was generating genuine enthusiasm. Then the fateful day arrived. The school was finally about to open its doors to an eager public.

Against all expectations, a storm broke out in the north of the country and soon covered the sky with a dark veil. Rain began to fall and the ambient light diminished. Ulyss's work was seriously compromised by this unforeseen change. A faint halo of light slipped through his pinhole aperture, too weak to cast the projection of the sky outside. Devastated, Ulyss decided to lock himself inside his dark chamber and never come out.

Having heard of the situation, a young journalist wrote a short piece in her column about this strange twist of fate inflicted upon a student. The story sparked a growing fascination among the public. Intrigued, visitors stopped before the still-closed door of the room, searching for some small opening through which an eye might peer.

The exhibition week was drawing to a close, and not a single ray of sunlight deigned to pierce the sky and its blanket of clouds. On the eve of the closing ceremony, a notice nailed to the door of the dark room informed the public that the following day the storm would dissipate, the weather would be fair, and the room would open. Word spread quickly ; the entire artistic community of the city soon knew about it. International gallerists dispatched representatives. Journalists hurried to draft articles. Some collectors were already preparing to invest in this long-awaited, mysterious, and ephemeral projection.

The immense agitation surrounding Ulyss's work kept him awake all night. He had left the dark room the evening before in preparation for the important day that awaited him. At dawn, he dressed in haste and was already making his way toward the school. The sun shone high in the sky. The building was still empty; the students' works waited patiently for the return of their creators. Ulyss bounded up the staircases, taking them four steps at a time, and reached the top floor in record time. It felt as though wings had sprouted from his feet. Euphoria carried him forward.

He stepped into the vestibule of the room without even noticing that the door was already open. Closing it behind him, he turned and heard a muffled sound coming from somewhere beyond the thick curtains that sealed off the chamber. A faint tearing noise, repeated again and again, broke the morning silence of the school. Startled, Ulyss felt his way toward the entrance and listened. The sound grew steadier. Summoning his courage, he pulled aside the curtains that separated him from the source of the sound. Light burst into the room and blinded him. Caught off guard by the sudden brightness, he needed a moment to understand what he was seeing. As his eyes adjusted, horror overtook him.

An entire section of the coverings that sealed the windows had been violently ripped away. Strips of black fabric lay scattered across the floor. Almost immediately he spotted the silhouette of a man standing in the backlight, apparently unaware of Ulyss's presence, grabbing handfuls of curtain and hacking them apart with a pair of scissors. Consumed by rage, Ulyss did not hesitate ; he lunged at the intruder, seized him by the throat, and dragged him across the room.

The man, startled, lashed out wildly, thrusting the scissors several times toward Ulyss's face. Ulyss dodged the blows and found himself face to face with the person who had shamelessly destroyed his work. The man now stood fully illuminated by the rising sun. Ulyss recognized him at once. His face looked a little more worn, his beard a little filthier, his eyes a little more unhinged, but it was Leroy, the same Leroy who had vanished without a trace.

A few weeks earlier, Leroy had abandoned his studio and managed to find temporary refuge on the couches of the few friends he still had left. He drank constantly, brooding over his failures while cursing poor Ulyss. When he read in the newspaper about the growing excitement surrounding Ulyss's graduation project, he took pleasure in the reports of the bad weather that had nearly prevented the installation from functioning. But when he learned that the dark room would finally be opened to the public, something in him snapped. He decided to take revenge.

His plan was simple: he would destroy the work before anyone else had the chance to see it. On the evening before the opening, he slipped unnoticed into the room just before the school closed, carrying a bottle of cheap whiskey and a pair of scissors. Hidden inside the darkness, he waited for dawn. He wanted to witness the projection for himself. As the first light of morning filtered through the pinhole aperture and cast the image of the sky onto the worn walls, Leroy laid on the floor sobering up beneath the drifting clouds. Their slow transformations, accompanied by the narrator's voice, filled him with a profound melancholy. When the latch clicked shut somewhere behind him and the projection ended he wiped a tear from his cheek. Struggling to his feet, he staggered across the room, took a final swallow of booze, and began cutting down the curtains one by one. Black fabric fell around him in heavy folds. As he worked, he repeated the same sentence over and over, louder each time, as though trying to convince himself: "No one else is going to see this work. No one else but me."

The two men now stood facing each other. Leroy, scissors in hand, his back hunched, could not stop grinning like a madman, exposing his crooked, rotten teeth. Ulyss, shaking with rage, his fists clenched, nevertheless kept a cautious eye on the unstable state of his opponent. Leroy's breathing became increasingly irregular. Ulyss felt his temples pounding. For a moment they stared at one another, sizing each other up in silence. Then a sharp crack broke the tension. Leroy turned abruptly. Behind him stood a small crowd gathered in the vestibule: photographers, journalists, students, and parents, all staring at the scene in disbelief. The school's director was there as well, leading the group, carrying a bouquet of ranunculus she had intended to present to Ulyss. She slowly lowered the flowers and looked around the room in dismay.

Leroy took advantage of the moment. He threw himself through the crowd. No one tried to stop him. He ran as fast as he could, charging down the stairs without slowing, like a hunted animal. Sweat poured down his forehead. Panic had taken hold of him. He barely registered the bewildered faces of the visitors he rushed past. Reaching the next flight of stairs, he stumbled, curled inward and fell. His body rolled all the way down to the ground floor. A screeching scream echoed through the school.

Leroy lay motionless. The scissors he had still been carrying during his escape had lodged between his ribs. A thin stream of blood escaped from his chest, ran down the steps, and spread across the linoleum into a small crimson cloud, frozen in place for everyone to see.

Ulyss was still upstairs, in the room the morning sun had only just begun to

warm. On his knees, trying to repair the damage Leroy had done, he lamented his fate. The destruction was simply too extensive. Before long the visitors began to leave, most of them disappointed, leaving Ulyss alone among the remains of his ruined work. The school closed its doors that same day. The evaluation committee nevertheless awarded Ulyss his diploma and quickly moved to deal with the incident by issuing a press statement. The building soon emptied. The students left for the summer. Some were relieved to have already secured contracts for the following year. Others, like Ulyss, could see no way out of the uncertainty that lay ahead.

8

Having recovered from his injury, Leroy received a short prison sentence for disturbing the public order. Ulyss was furious. He hated Leroy, and everyone around him who had failed to help him. Shut away in his room, he could no longer find the energy to watch a film. The string of cruel misfortunes that had befallen him over the years had finally broken his spirit. Betrayed in love and worn down by one disappointment after another, Ulyss admitted defeat. He wandered the streets alone, his mind empty, much like Leroy had done, a man he had once sworn never to resemble.

Ulyss lived alone now. His roommate and close friend Judith had been taken away by her parents and was undergoing a lengthy rehabilitation program in a Jesuit convent in Spain. With no news from anyone, Ulyss withdrew completely, avoiding all contact and leaving his apartment only occasionally to buy a few tins of sardines packed in oil. His body sluggish and heavy, he surrendered himself to idleness, no longer possessing the strength to overcome the malaise that had settled over him.

The months passed. The days grew steadily shorter, and the clouds, having descended to earth in the form of a dense fog, wrapped themselves around the city and its inhabitants. Ulyss heard that a prestigious gallery was opening an exhibition featuring former students from his graduating class. The show would highlight the strongest projects of the recent graduates, "celebrating a remarkable new generation of artists." Naturally, Ulyss was not among them. As the opening night approached and invitations circulated widely, Ulyss fou nd himself excluded, no one had invited him. He decided to go anyway.

The gallery was packed. The crowd spilled out onto the street despite the cold, wine glasses in one hand and cigarettes in the other, talking loudly over the pulse of electronic music. The small group of young artists stood slightly apart, watching the crowd with studied indifference, though clearly proud of having made such a dramatic entrance into the unforgiving world of contemporary art.

A shadow slipped into the crowd. Ulyss, wearing a navy pea coat with the collar pulled up to his cheekbones and a gray cashmere beanie pulled low over his brow, made his way into the overcrowded gallery. His eyes were distant and unfocused. Earlier that evening, he had already spent some time drinking alone at a nearby bar. He headed straight for the refreshments table, ordered a beer, drained it in a few gulps, then took a cup of mulled wine. Sipping it slowly, he wandered quietly among the guests.

The selected works were baffling.Their obscure and elusive nature made it nearly impossible for Ulyss to grasp what they were trying to communicate. Strange combinations of unrelated objects, pages covered in indecipherable text, and tiny photographs were scattered throughout the room. Nothing sat on pedestals; everything had been placed directly on the floor, where visitors nearly stepped on it as they passed. There were no wall labels, no exhibition guides, no explanatory texts of any kind. Nothing offered even the slightest clue as to the logic behind this improbable collection of objects dispersed across a pristine white space lit with deliberate restraint. If there was a thread connecting any of it, Ulyss struggled to find it.

Only one thing managed to hold his attention. In a corner of the gallery stood a small lectern made of pine, illuminated by the warm glow of a wood-burning stove. The fire cast a pale, yellow light across its surface. Resting on the lectern were an inkwell, a blotter, a fountain pen, and several letters, some carefully folded, others scattered loosely across the tabletop. Ulyss stepped closer and began to read the lines written on one of the sheets of paper.

"*Dear U.,*"

He froze.

"Y*our confession left me cold. How could you have believed, even for a second, that I would become yours? You allowed yourself to be carried away, my poor boy, by feelings far greater than you could understand. Your confusion reveals a profound insecurity. I saw through your defenses with ease, and beneath them I found someone frightened, incapable.*

It is not my indifference that torments you, but the names you give it: resentment, oblivion. You want me without loving me. You would like to count yourself among those who surrender passionately, who abandon their integrity and throw themselves into the arms of another.But I am only a supposition, a thought so fragile that you cannot touch it with your fingertips without it shattering into pieces.

So forget me.

This letter is from me."

Ulyss could hardly believe what he was reading. His hands trembling, he picked up another letter.

"*Dear U.,*

This cannot go on., this misery cannot go on.

Remember that, and try to control yourself, because nothing truly lasts. Not joy, not sorrow, not even life itself, which is far shorter than we imagine. A day will come, sooner than you think, when none of this will matter to you anymore. You will look back on this moment and wonder how you could ever have been so foolish.

So disappear. Be silent.

This letter is from me."

And then another.

"D*ear U.,*

How can someone love in such a way?

Without knowing. Without learning. Without recognizing the warning signs that would have sent a wiser person in the opposite direction.
How does one endure humiliation and still hurl oneself toward certain failure? For style? For pride? To satisfy an oversized ego? Or perhaps simply to follow one's curiosity to its furthest conclusion.
No one can answer that. Only you know.

You know the depth of the wound that still refuses to close. The wound that my silence opened and that continues to consume you, carrying you into states of near paralysis.

If only you had known how far it would go.

So tell me, do you regret it?

This letter is from me."

Ulyss immediately recognized whose hand had written the letters and to whom they were addressed. He stood speechless. At last, here was the answer he had been waiting for. And what an answer it was.

Feeling unsteady, he took a step back. His eyes drifted across the rest of the letters. There were dozens of them. They all shared the same form, varying only slightly in tone and style, and every one ended the same way: "This letter is from me". His gaze shifted toward the stove, where the fire crackled softly. Among the glowing embers he could make out fragments of paper, half-consumed, bearing the same handwriting. The words clung stubbornly to existence, fighting against the flames. A chill ran down his spine. Someone was standing beside him. He turned. It was her.

The first thing he saw was her eyes.They seemed impossibly large. Tiny flecks drifted within them like distant celestial bodies. It was as though an entire solar system spilled across the cheekbones. One could almost glimpse the beginning of the universe there, the earliest sketches of the Milky Way.

And her hair. Every time he had seen her, she had worn it differently. So many transformations that he almost felt he no longer recognized her. And yet, when she stepped closer, he felt her presence deep in the marrow of his bones. He knew that only a few inches separated him from the judgment he had feared for so long.

She smiled. A genuine smile. The tobacco had stained her teeth; the enamel darkened at the edges. Yet the smile possessed a brightness of its own, pure, impossible to describe.

Ulyss remained silent, his throat tightened shut. She spoke first.

- "I'm glad you came," she said, still wearing that radiant smile. "I was afraid you wouldn't."

- "You know," she continued, gesturing toward the lectern and the stack of letters, "I made all of this because of you. Your confession inspired me a lot. In fact, I realized that no single reply could ever have been the right one, so I decided to write dozens instead."

She paused.

- "Do you want to know why I burn them?"

He answered quietly ; "Yes..."

- "Although they were written for you, these letters are only drafts. When you sent me that long, confused message and I never replied, I felt sorry for the effort behind it, for something so doomed from the beginning.

The words you had chosen, words that must have cost you so much effort and embarrassment, continued to exist beyond their fragile moment. They were preserved indefinitely inside the digital memory of my phone. I read them often, those unanswered sentences. And I wanted to destroy them. So my response took this form. I wanted to return love letters to their natural condition, to restore their fragility, their impermanence."

Ulyss lowered his head. He stared at the tips of his shoes.

- "Why are you torturing me like this?" he muttered. "What have I done to de-

serve this humiliation?"

- "Nothing, poor Ulyss. You simply offered yourself up to someone who expected nothing from you, and in doing so, you allowed me to make use of the strange obsession you had with me. Nothing more than that. Don't resent me for too long. It's true, I used you. But I used you for creative purposes. You should feel flattered."

Ulyss did not answer. He remained perfectly still, no longer daring to raise his head and meet her gaze. After a moment, he saw her heels turn away and disappear among the crowd of guests. Only then did he move. He walked straight to the lectern.

Gathering every letter she had written, he clutched them tightly against his chest. With his free hand, he grabbed the handle of the small cast-iron stove and pulled the door open. He shoved the entire stack of papers into the fire and slammed the door shut. In his haste, he burned his fingers.

From across the room, she watched him with a faint smile. A few visitors looked on in astonishment, making no attempt to intervene. They seemed to assume that what they were witnessing was part of the artwork itself.

The letters burned slowly. Ulyss then lifted his cup of mulled wine and emptied it directly into the stove. The fire died at once with a soft hiss. A delicate scent of spices and wine drifted through the air. Ulyss let out a cry of despair. He adjusted his beanie, pulled his coat collar higher around his face, and fled through the crowd, head bowed.

Soon he was wandering the city without direction, cradling his burned fingers in one hand. He walked so quickly that he was nearly running. The wind cut through the streets, and the cold numbed his limbs. The silence only made him move faster. He collapsed into a dimly lit side street, crouching between two parked cars, and sat there sobering up from the evening's disaster.

He would never have been so close to throwing himself into the water. He waited there for someone to lift him up, carry him above the fainted crowd like a martyr, and cast him into deep, silent waters so he could drown. The angel never came.

He woke up the next morning, his body numb, still fully dressed, in his bed reeking of beer and mulled wine. He had lost. Everything he had ever hoped to possess had slipped through his fingers and turned against him. It was becoming madness. Ulyss was betting against the most brutal and implacable forces.

His thoughts slowed, corroded; when faced with that cursed circle of intellectuals, he found nothing left to say. He envvied them. He hated them. He hated them all. His friends, his lovers, his dear ones. He loved her.

It was no longer bearable. How could she be so cruel, and he so unstable?

He had promised himself promised not to drink, not to see her again. And yet he knew: returning to that rotten place meant seeing her again. Everyone knew it. They laughed at him. He tried to disappear behind his mask, to hide in the crowd, to erase himself. It never worked. They saw him. He was visible. Disturbing. So be it. Only her seemed undisturbed. She clung to his mind like a persistent stain. Penelope. A ruthless, unrelenting Penelope.

Unable to stay home brooding, he left again, as far as he could, without looking back. Searching for a place where his grief might soften, he boarded a train, hoping for landscapes that could calm him. Horizons sliding past the window, distant and steady, something solid to hold against his fractured mind.

On that cold winter day, when the sun struggled to warm the frozen ground, Ulyss noticed through the fogged window of the carriage a strange arrangement of gravestones marking the presence of a cemetery. Immediatly, he decided to go there.

To this day, the ghost of Ulyss haunts the walls of the LRAA, bringing misfortune upon all those students who will most likely go on to have brighter futures than his.

Mocking, he never stops sneering at these young artists who fill the corridors and saturate the space with their vitality. It is a sad fate for this ghost of an alum. His dreams of grandeur, his obscure ideas, vanished at the same time as he did.

Years passed. New faces came and went before his powerless gaze. This is his place now: a spectral guardian of broken hope. May he rest there for eternity, and inspire confidence in those who doubt, in those for whom uncertainty is an old companion. Do not worry, Ulyss is here ; your helpless guardian angel will guide your hesitant steps, because like him, you will stumble, you will tangle yourself in strange digressions, and you will fail miserably. But do not fear it. Because Ulyss watches. And from his faint glow, the hope of success persists.

And perhaps, from his misery alone, the incandescent happiness of others will emerge.

The writer, although anonymous, would like to admit to the reader that this text was partially translated from French into English using AI language models.

May this short explanation serve as an example, as it is written by the writer himself, of his ability to write in English. He may add that a lack of time (and possibly of energy) and resources to find a competent human translator led to the use of language models in the most faithful way possible.

The writer would like to preserve his integrity and assure the reader that none of the sentences were enhanced, nor was the syntax made more fluent. The entire text was later reviewed and approved by the writer himself.

If the reader suddenly feels the urge to throw this book away, they should know that the paper it is printed on is made entirely from agricultural waste.